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THE CHILD, THE WISE MAN, AND THE DEVIL

THE CHILD, THE WISE MAN, AND THE DEVIL

BY

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"GOD AND THE ANT," "SORROW AND SONG," "A BOOK OF STRANGE SINS," "A DEAD MAN'S DIARY," "CAPTAIN SHANNON" ETC.

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TO THE TWO

WHO HAVE TAUGHT ME MOST:

MY WHITE-HAIRED AND EVER-LOVED FATHER,

AND

MY GOLDEN-HEADED, TWELVEMONTH-OLD

DAUGHTER AND DARLING,

BERYL.

"THRUMS,"
SOUTH-END-ON-SEA,
England, Sept. 3, 1896.

PROEM

I DREAMT that I stood within the walls of a great city. Under the deep dense blue of an Italian sky, innumerable towers, domes, temples, and palaces glittered and whitened — like head-stones bleaching in a cemetery — in the morning sunshine, and in the centre rose the cross-crowned cupola of a huge cathedral. And in the streets and squares of the city I beheld the vastest concourse which the eye of man hath

ever witnessed. People of every race and every nation swarmed, ant-like, in the houses and streets; and when I looked beyond the city's limits, I saw that the country for many miles around was thick with tents and pavilions, so that it seemed as if the place had become, as it were, the camping-ground of nations.

Then, turning to one who stood near me, I said, "Surely this is Rome, the Eternal City?"

And he made answer, "It is."

"And yonder church," I said, "is it not the church of St. Peter?"

"It hath so been called of old," he responded, "but it is called so now no longer."

"What call they it, then?" I asked.

"The Church of the One God," replied the man.

Then said I, "Tell me, I pray thee, why the name hath been so changed, and what means this multitude, for I am but newly arrived in the city."

And, looking at me curiously, the man made answer, "Whence come ye, that ye know not that they have found the body of the Christ?"

Then said I: "Nay, but that were impossible, for we know that our Saviour Christ was crucified and buried; and that He rose again the third day, according to the Scripture,

and ascended into heaven, where He sitteth on the right hand of the Father."

But he answered me sternly, "It is true that the man whom thou callest the Saviour Christ did claim for Himself, that He, being equal with God, was not subject unto death, but would rise again the third day. And it is true, too, that because His body was not found His disciples gave out that He had so risen and ascended. Wherefore Him the world has most idolatrously worshipped, according unto a mortal the glory which belongeth only unto God. Which idolatry God hath for nineteen hundred years endured patiently,

visiting not their evil-doings upon the heads of the idolaters, but waiting until, in the fulness of time, He might put to scorn the pretensions of the crucified Nazarene, and make manifest the abundance of God's mercy and the magnitude of man's sinning.

" For know ye that they have found in Palestine, in the rock-hewn sepulchre whither it was borne, nineteen hundred years ago, by Joseph of Arimathea, the body of Him who claimed that death had no dominion over Him."

Then said I, " And hath any for this reason forsaken Christ ? "

And he made answer, " Thou

seest how many people are here gathered together? Thinkest thou it is in the power of any man to number them?"

"As well might one seek to number the sands on the seashore," I replied.

Then said he, "Thou speakest truly. Here for the first time the monarchs of every nation which hath held the Christian faith are, with their courts and councils, their lords spiritual and temporal, gathered together. Know ye why they are met?"

"I know not," I answered.

Then said he, "They are here to make solemn confession on their own

behalf, and on behalf of the people over whom they rule, of the iniquity of which they and their forefathers have been guilty, in that they have bowed the knee to a mortal, worshipping as God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, one who was of flesh and blood, and subject unto death, as we all are. They are met to make public and solemn Renunciation of their error. To-day, at noon, in yonder church, and in every church throughout the world where Christ has been worshipped as God, Christ shall be renounced and proclaimed man, the symbols of the Trinity and of the Cross shall be cast down and destroyed, that thereby all men may

know that God is not Three but One. If thou wilt thou shalt come with me to yonder cathedral where I will show thee this great ceremony that thou mayest believe for thyself that Jesus of Nazareth was an impostor."

But I made answer: "Though thou show me this, and more; though, like Thomas, I behold the wounds in the hands and feet, and thrust my finger into the pierced side, yet would I not believe that Jesus, my Lord and Master, was an impostor, for I know in Whom I have trusted. Rather would I believe that this thing of which thou speakest is one of those wiles of Satan of which we have been

warned in Holy Writ, — how that in the latter days there should arise 'false prophets,' whose 'coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders,' that they who serve not the truth should 'believe a lie.'"

Then said the man, "'T is childish to refuse to believe the evidence of one's senses, — as childish as it is to be satisfied with so outworn a creed as thine."

"Were I to judge by sense," I made answer, "I should believe that I see the sun at a moment when he is actually below the horizon, and when I know that it is but his reflected image, and not himself, which

I see. And to be satisfied with the Christian faith may be childlike, but is not childish ; for though the child may find in it all he needs, yet many of the wisest of this world have confessed that the longer they have pondered it, the closer they have studied it, the more cause have they found for wonder, for worship, and for love. The great minds of the world — the Shakespeares and Miltons of the race — are on our side, not yours, and for the very reason that they *were* great, for the reason that they *were* wise, and did not merely think themselves so. It is true that ours is the simplest of all faiths. It must needs be so, since

it appeals alike to rich and to poor, to the young and to the old, to the sick and to the strong, and not less to the sempstress in her garret, who, when she lays down the work at which she has been toiling early and late, is too weary-eyed and worn to take up a book, or even to think, than to the woman of fashion, or to the man of leisure who has devoted his life to the search for knowledge. Were it not so, the strength of its appeal would be exactly proportionate to the intellectual capacity of the individual, and half humanity — the half which needs Him most — would be left without the help and hope which are given freely to all by the

Great Consoler, Christ. And yet, for all its simplicity, I believe that could we stand with God at the centre of all things, we should see that the one supreme and controlling law — the pivot upon which the laws of this and all other universes turn — is the law of vicarious sacrifice — the law which had ordained, ere the foundations of the world were laid, that the sins of the world should be laid upon God's Son, the Sinless Christ."

Then said the man, derisively, "He whom thou callest the Son of God was but a bastard — the child of Mary, mis-called the Virgin, and her lover Joseph the Carpenter."

"Surely thou hast no child of

thine own," I made answer, "that thou canst so speak of Him who consecrated childhood forever by His own Divine Childhood — who consecrated it afresh, with a higher, holier meaning, when, in His Divine Manhood, he uttered those words, which to the ears of every mother of to-day are as full of sweet music as ever they were to the mothers of Palestine: 'Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.'"

Then said the man, "All this is nothing to me who have neither wife nor child."

"That I can well believe," I

answered; "for surely no father, no mother, — whether the little one were on earth or in heaven, — could hear the sweet music of those words unmoved. That picture of the little child nestling as naturally, as trustfully, in Our Saviour's arms as in the arms of her mother, and smiling up with perfect love, perfect confidence, into the face which looked down upon hers with Divine tenderness, Divine Fatherliness — though for His ears no child lips might ever lisp the wonderful word 'Father' — has consecrated all children to the Christ and the Christ to every child. It must remain for all time the one picture of spotless purity upon which

human eyes have looked — the interchange of loving smiles between the innocent child and the Sinless Man. So long as that picture is guarded in the heart of one mother, so long canst thou never hope to destroy Christianity. That little child in the arms of Jesus has struck deadlier blows at the enemies of the Cross than all the arguments of all the theologians. That child is the most powerful foe whom the armies of infidelity have to fear."

As if the heavens had thundered "Amen" to the words I had spoken, there came the sudden roll of cannon.

"'Tis the signal for the procession to start," said my companion, and

over that great assembly there passed a tremor of expectancy, like the stirring of leaves when rain is nigh.

Afar off we heard a vibrating hum — like the droning of insects on a sunny summer's noon — which moved me strangely, for I knew it for the distant voice of a mighty multitude. Sometimes it died away, as the chiming of bells dies away when the wind falls, and then it swelled again until the hum was as the murmur of an incoming tide, and soon it was like the roar of breakers upon the shore, so that we could hear the clash of music and the cheers rippling along the lines like volleying bells.

And then, slow-moving to stately music, there came into view a procession of supreme splendour. Monarch after monarch — Kaiser and Czar, Emperors, Kings, and Queens, arrayed in royal robes, and surrounded by their courts and councillors, passed by in state on their way to the cathedral. And as sovereign succeeded to sovereign, pageant to pageant, there went up from that vast assembly such thunder of applause that the thread of my dream was broken, and the scene shifted as it were by magic, and in a moment. I was no longer in the streets, where all Rome was ringing with the riotous uproar, but kneeling — one of

innummerable thousands — in the great cathedral. The rolling as of thunder was still in my ears, but I knew it now for the rolling of the organ which sank and sank, until it was lost in listening silence, out of which arose the voice of one leading the people in prayer.

"Almighty and most merciful Father, the ONE GOD of Heaven and Earth and Judge of all men, we confess and bewail the grievous and idolatrous sin of which we and our fathers before us have been guilty. We do most earnestly repent and humbly beseech that Thou wilt grant us Thy forgiveness, and keep us evermore in Thy fear, Who livest and reignest ONE GOD evermore. Amen."

Then, while the great congregation

remained kneeling, the kings and rulers arose, one by one, and, divesting themselves of their royal robes, walked with bowed heads, and knelt in sight of all before the altar that they might make solemn intercession, on their own behalf, and on behalf of their people, for the idolatry of which they had been guilty.

And after they had so remained for some minutes, he who led the congregation in prayer turned to the kneeling multitude saying: "Do ye for evermore renounce the Deceiver, who, claiming that he had come to take away the sins of the world, hath laid upon the world the burden of nineteen hundred years' idolatry?"

And, as with one voice, kings and people made answer: —

"We renounce him for evermore."

Then, like an overcharged bosom, upgathered in a sob, the swelling dome of the great cathedral gave utterance to a sullen, sudden, reverberant note of woe — the death-knell of a God — and at the sound, a strange hush which was not silence, but palpitated, as it were, with the pent-up breathing and tumultuous heart-beating of a multitude, fell upon the assembly. And he who stood at the altar reached forward, and took, from its place over the table of God, the image of the crucified Christ, and, turning to the people, he held it up-

raised for a moment before them. Then crying out, "The Reign of the Christ is at end. The ONE GOD reigneth, and is worshipped evermore," he dashed it down into atoms on the marble pavement at his feet. And out in the sunlight the cannon thundered; and from a hundred steeples the bells of Rome burst forth merrily into song, that all men might know that the Religion of Sorrow was ended; the Reign of Joy was begun.

THE CHILD, THE WISE MAN, AND THE DEVIL

IN my dream I looked down upon the world, and I saw that the world was in darkness, save for one great light, which streamed from an upraised Cross. And I saw that the glory which shone from the Cross made manifest the very heaven of heavens, so that even while men trod the dark and thorny ways of the world, they might at any time look up, and see above them the loving Father — Face of God.

And some I saw who, lighting little candles of their own making at the great light of the Cross, cried out, "Come, see the light I have found! Here is light, compared to which all other lights are as darkness!"

Others said, "See how light it is! *This* is the light of day. Why stands yonder Cross in the sunlight to throw its gloomy shadow over the world? Come, let us pull it down, that we may be no longer saddened by the symbol of eternal sorrow."

And as they so spoke, the light from the Cross suddenly faded out, and with it, all the little lights that had been kindled at its fire, leaving the world in darkness utter and complete.

And I heard the voice of God, saying: "Lo, I have given unto mankind the most precious gift I had to bestow!

"The creature can at no time be equal with its Creator, and as man may not become God — God, out of the great love He bore the world, was willing to become man. Wherefore the High and Holy One who inhabiteth eternity, did, for man's sake, humble Himself to become a helpless babe — to live man's life, to share man's sorrow, and to die man's death, that henceforth, for every man, life might lose its loneliness and death its horror; for God was become not only man's Maker

and Judge, but also man's Divine Comrade and Brother.

"And now in these latter days, this divinest of all gifts — this Sacrifice of Himself by the Creator for the sake of His creature — is by that creature rejected and scorned. The most sacred and solemn of all mysteries is become a thing of which men make mock, denying — because of the very Humanity which for their sakes He had stooped to share — the Divinity which was His ere He had called Humanity into being.

"They speak of their Risen and Ascended Saviour as a dead dreamer, or a vain deceiver, declaring that Chris-

tianity is an outworn creed, a thing of yesterday, and the story of the Divine Man a fable fit only for the ears of a child."

And God spake again, saying, —

"O faithless and godless generation! O mockers of good and workers of iniquity! have I not already borne with you over-long? Day by day have I stood knocking at your door, entreating you to accept a gift, which, were it not offered freely ye would count life itself well spent to win. And day by day ye have thrust Me out and driven me forth — as ye would thrust away a thief or beggar from your door.

"But now, behold! I come to you

no more. Ye — at whose door your God and Saviour hath stood so long entreating entrance vainly — shall knock unheeded at the Door of Life. Out of your own mouth shall proceed your judgment. Ye have said that there is no Christ, that He who came to bear away the sin of the world, and, by His glorious resurrection from the dead, to bring unto all men the gift of eternal life, was either deluded, or a deluder, who lies, and hath lain these nineteen hundred years, in His unknown and unhonoured grave in Palestine. That is what ye have said, and by your own words shall come your condemnation. *I who gave can take away. I who made can*

unmake. Let be. It is as ye say. There is no Christ."

And as God so spoke, it seemed to me that He wiped out — as a child wipes out an unworked sum from his slate — all that the great name of Jesus means and has meant to humanity. For one instant I saw, shining down the dark vista of the ages, the Supreme Figure of the Divine Man. Below me, as on a midnight plain that stretched away into infinite darkness, lay the wounded in life's battle — the widowed, the orphaned, the friendless, the sick, the halt, and the sin-bound. And I saw that it was to this one Divine and shining Figure, the very Light of the

World, that all hands were uplifted, — upon which every eye was fixed. I saw the Christ look down upon His suffering creatures with eyes from which streamed tears of tender and pitying love. I heard the great and yearning cry which rose to His lips at sight of their sorrows; I saw Him stretch forth His arms to them as a mother stretches forth her arms to her stricken child; and then — the sublime and lonely Figure of the Man of Sorrows faded out forever, and upon helpless, hopeless, sin-stained, and suffering humanity, darkness and despair descended, like vultures descending upon their prey.

. . . . . .

Yet again I dreamed a dream in which pictures came and went as in a glass.

I looked down upon a Christless world, and I saw that though the same sun made glad the morning, the same stars made beautiful the night, the men and women who dwelt thereon were become haggard, restless, and unhappy. Some few there were who sat together, laughing feverishly, but there was no mirth in their laughter, for their faces were anxious and perturbed, and even while they laughed they cast uneasy glances about them, as if fearing to be surprised by an unseen foe. And I saw that they who had protested

that the bread and wine of the Gospel was a mouthful too difficult to swallow, ate greedily of strange meats which came from other altars, or which were prepared for them by the hands of the high-priests of a new philosophy. They who declared that reason would not allow them to believe that God could once become Incarnate, saw no reason to doubt the manifold Re-Incarnation of Man. They who complained that they found the straight and level highway of Christianity too difficult a road for them to follow, or that there was no sure foothold therein, were content to lose themselves among the mazes of Superstition, or to flounder

and stumble among the stony wastes of Unbelief. And many I saw who wandered backward and forward aimlessly, as if seeking for something which they found not. And ever and anon one would cry out, "Lo, I have it!" and the others would cease their search, and run with gladness to hear him. But so often as one thus called out, so often would they who ran return whence they came, unsatisfied and unfilled, until not a few ceased to give ear at all.

Then said I to one who passed by, "For what seek ye?"

"For the answer to the Riddle of Life," he replied.

And I said, "Why troublest thou thyself about things which are too great for thee? Do as others do. Eat, drink, marry, beget children, and be merry. Thou needest not to know the answer to the riddle till the day come when thou must go behind the great Dark to seek it for thyself. But that day is as yet far distant, for thy years are not many, and haply thou hast still a long time to live."

Then the man made answer: "What matters it to the mote in the Sunbeam, whether it be a minute or a moment drifting across the ray from dark to dark? But that which troubles me, and gives me no rest

till I have read life's riddle aright, is not the question of what is to befall me personally hereafter. Were I but the mote in the Sunbeam to which I have likened myself, I would fearlessly and manfully face whatever the future hath for me of good or ill. But I have a wife whom I love, a child that I worship; and the thought that one day — any day — death may part us, never, perhaps, to set eyes on one another again, haunts me, holds me, and makes my life a very hell. 'T were horror enough to lose a dear one, even were we sure that those who love each other here shall hereafter love each other, and be together again.

But even that much of certainty has been denied us, for Death slams in the face of the living the door through which he has hurried the beloved dead."

Then said I, "Thou, and those thou lovest, are, at least — whether living or dead — in the hand of God."

"What know ye of God?" asked the man.

And I made answer, "That He is Great."

"So great that He careth not for me or mine," said the man bitterly. "Who am I that God should trouble Himself concerning me? Why should I, who am but one among

many millions of men whom He hath made, be of more account to Him than one egg in the belly of the herring, which He hath made also? If the egg become a fish, it is well; if it be destroyed or devoured, it is well equally. So, too, with the man. God hath set the sun in the sky to warm him by day, the moon and stars to companion him by night. God says to him, 'I have done my part. Go forth, now, to fare for thyself, — to sorrow or to be glad, to be hungry or to be full, to be sick or to be strong, to live or to die, as may chance with thee.'"

Then said I, "Nay, One who

cannot lie, hath told us that the very hairs of our head are numbered, and that not a sparrow shall fall and be forgotten before the Father."

"Whom mean ye?" asked the man.

And I made answer, "The Christ of God."

Then said the man, sadly, "Christ! There is no Christ. Would God there were! Until I ceased to believe in the Christ, I realized not that, except through Him, we know no more of the Ruler of the Universe than did he who of all complained, 'Canst thou by searching, find out God?' Except God reveal Himself to man, man knows

not what God is, or whether God be at all. Once I believed that God had so revealed Himself, and then this earth was the ante-chamber to Heaven. Now it is but a prison, whence there is no escape —a prison in which we are held captive at the will of an Unknown Gaoler. What matters it to me that the earth be beautiful? What matters it to the prisoner that his cell be painted, when he knows that the bony hand of Death, the executioner, may, at any moment, drag him forth from the dear companionship of his loved ones, and hustle him and them away to an unknown fate? While I believed

that God had so revealed Himself, every soul was sacred to me. We were members of one Divine Family. We were brothers and sisters in our Brother, Lord, and Redeemer. Now we are but fellow-victims who are flung to life's lions together in the same arena. Then, our very bereavements were sanctified to us. Sorrow was God's accolade. It was the sword-stroke which bade us arise up God's knights, ready ever to draw sword in His service. Now, we have no such call to nobility, for each one liveth to himself. We are no longer knights, banded together in a noble cause, but units in a mob, scrambling and fighting, each with the

other, for the trinkets which are tossed to us by our capricious mistress, Fate. When I believed that God Himself had stooped to share our joys and sorrows, human life was made evermore beautiful and divine. Then, the very earth beneath our feet was sacred, since He had trodden it; then, was this robe of flesh, which He had worn, a white garment which, for His dear sake, we must keep unspotted from the world. Then, did Art and Song, picture and poem, sunrise and sunset, and the play of evening light upon the sea, combine in one divine conspiracy to urge us heavenward; then, not a flower in the field, not a face in the street, but

called us to a higher and holier life. But now our life! — but what matters our life? If Christ be not; if God be not as Christ pictured Him" —

I heard no more, for the man had passed on to seek elsewhere the answer to the Riddle of Life.

. . . . . .

In my dream I beheld yet another picture of the Christless world.

A woman lay dying in a garret, and to her came one who was very wise, saying: "Thou hast sent for me, because thou wouldst have word with me ere thou diest. If thou knowest aught which concerns me, or if there is any matter upon which I can

advise thee, speak now, and I will give heed."

And the woman said: "I was but a girl — vain and foolish, perhaps, but with no thought of evil, when evil befell me. I have done evil since, and by mine own choosing, but God, who is my judge, knows that I fell into that first folly, scarce knowing what I did, save that I trusted him to whom my heart was given. But evil is like the sea, and hath no pity on the foolish or the ignorant. Just as deep water sucks under and swallows up the child who has fallen into it accidentally, while it bears harmlessly upon its bosom, the man who has learnt to swim, so

the young man or maiden who ventures into evil ignorantly is swallowed up and drawn under, while others, who seek vice deliberately, may at least evade — if only by their very knowledge of evil — the outward penalty of their sin. I slipt into sin unthinkingly, as a child might slip from an unguarded place into deep water; and my sin was like the dead weight of wet clothes about the drowning child, dragging me down and down, till the waters closed over my head. Some at whose door I knocked, when I set out to seek the work which should keep my baby and myself in bread, drew back their skirts, as if my very touch were contamination,

and bade me begone for a wanton. Others spoke kindly and pitifully, and would have sent me to a 'Home;' but I shrank from the thought of such shelter and such associates as the starving pauper shrinks from the thought of the workhouse; and I told them that it was work, not charity, which I needed, and that if they would but give me employment, they should find me a faithful servant and true. But they shook their heads, and said it was sad, very sad, and they were sorry. This one excused herself because she feared to seem to encourage immorality; a second hesitated to receive me into her household lest she should give offence to those

who were already serving her. Others spoke uneasily of 'brothers' or 'sons;' and, though many pitied me; and some offered me money, each was anxious to pass me on.

"It seemed to me then, in my despair, as if all women were either heartless or cowardly, and all men vile; and — since that which I had lost could never be regained — I asked myself of what use was it to continue the hopeless struggle, and whether it were worse to go clad in a garment of vice than to slink from door to door, scarce covered by the rags of what had once been virtue.

"I need not tell you the familiar

story. Let me hasten on to say that while I was leading a life of shame, with no hope in this world or in the next, I met with an accident in the street, and was carried to a hospital, where, while I was recovering, the good Sister who tended me talked much and lovingly of the Christ."

"'T is ever so with these Christians," said the Wise Man, interrupting her. "A sick woman is sent to them to be healed in the body, and they let slip no opportunity of seeking to entice her away to follow after superstitions."

Then said the woman: "How comes it, then, that ye who deny the

Christ have built no hospital of your own to which to send your sick?"

But the Wise Man made no answer.

Then said the woman, turning on him, fiercely: "What have you to give me, in return for the faith which you have taken from me?

"Is there any hope for such as I, save in the Cross of Christ? I was despised of all — a thing of shame at which the very children in the street — old, alas! in the knowledge of evil — pointed the finger of scorn; and One came to me, speaking me tenderly and lovingly, and greeting me — the outcast — with such greeting as is accorded to good women. He came to me in my despair to

bring me hope; He came to me in my degradation to bring me back my self-respect. And when I said, 'Lord, it is too late. I have sinned away the very soul of me, and can never be pure again,' He made answer, 'Believe it not, daughter. 'T is devils' doctrine, even though they teach it thee in my name. Thou canst never regain thine innocence, for innocence — which is often but another name for ignorance — is a flower which once plucked, a vase which once broken, can never be the same again. But purity is a white star in the heavens which maketh pure the soul of all who set their eyes thereon with longing.

It may seem to thee sometimes as if thou hadst lost it, but if thou wilt walk with upturned eyes; if thou wilt forsake the misty marsh-land for the mountain-top and the presence of God, then shalt thou see its light clear — shining through the cloud behind which, it may be, the High and Holy One has but seemed to hide it, so that thou mayest learn to love it the more.'

"Then said I, 'Yea, Lord, but though I have striven — oh! so despairingly — to clamber out of the black and seething abyss into which I have fallen, the burden of my sin is a clog around my neck to drag

me back and down to deeper depths.'

"But He made answer, 'Even now I lift the burden from thy shoulder to mine. That thou mayest be freed from thy sins, and from the consequences of thy sins, I bear and have borne the burden of Eternal Sorrow.'

"And I said, 'Yea, Lord. Yet can I never undo the past. The soul of me is black, and corrupt, and foul, as with leprosy; and not all the water of the world can wash me clean again.'

"But He made answer, '*Thou* canst never undo the past, but *I* can, and will. And though thy soul

be as black as thou sayest, I can make it whiter than the new-fallen snow.'

"And I said, 'Yea, Lord, but I am weak — weaker and more unstable than water. Not once, but ten thousand times, have I risen from the mire, and striven, with all the strength that was in me, to walk without stumbling. And not once, but ten thousand times, have I found myself low-grovelling in the mire again. And now I have neither heart nor hope to continue the unequal contest. The sins that I have committed in the past, those sins shall I go on committing to my life's end, for I know myself too

well not to know my own inability to resist sin.'

" And He made answer, 'Though thy stumblings were twenty times ten thousand, yet so long as thou wilt but arise after each fall, so long will I have for thee in my heart an especial tenderness. And if thou wilt but come to me, saying, " Lord, I bring to thee my sin, and I bring to thee, too, my inability to resist my sin. Help thou me, for in myself there is no help," then will I abide with thee by day and by night, then will I fight with thee and for thee, until my strength has made thee strong, and thou hast learned to loathe the sins which now thou lovest, and

so shall come to conquer them for thyself.' "

Then said the Wise Man, "And didst thou believe all this?"

And the woman made answer, "I did."

"Thou wert easily comforted," said he. "But what hath all this to do with me?"

"Thou shalt hear," replied the woman. "This, of which I have told thee, happened many years ago; and from that day to this, I turned my back on my old life. At first, I and my babe were like to starve, but at last I found honest work for my hand to do, and at that I toiled diligently, seeking to make amends

for the past, and to follow after Him who had done such wondrous things for me. But not long since there came upon me a great temptation. The man for whose sake I had first sinned, the man whom I had never ceased to love — as women (God help them !) sometimes love the men whom they have most cause to hate — found me out, and told me that he had loved me always, and had long ago sought for me to make me his wife. He said that the woman whom he had at last married, when he gave up all hope of finding me, was his wife in name only. He said that if I would but come to him — I and our child, for he had no other child of his

own, — he would make the child's future his care, and he would watch over us and work for us to his life's end."

"And what didst thou?" asked the Wise Man.

"I left him, and fled with my child where he could no longer find us. Oh, but my heart cried out for him, and for his love, day and night, for I loved him and love him now with my whole being, and but for the fact that I could not so sin against the command of the Christ my Saviour, I had cast my scruples to the wind, and gone to the man I loved. And then it was, at this supreme crisis in my life, when all my world was unsettled, and when I most needed help and

strength from without, that your book, in which you seek to destroy men's faith in the Christ, was put into my hand. My heart told me that its teaching was false, but it is easy to believe the thing we wish to believe ; and so it came about that I tried to persuade myself that your arguments were unanswerable, and to persuade myself, also, that my faith was shaken, and that, as I no longer believed in the Christ, I need no longer count myself subject to His command. It is thus that we men and women palter with our conscience, declaring that our life is the outcome of our creed, whereas our creed is, too often, the outcome of our life. I

need tell thee no more, except that I was saved from the sin I would have committed by the death of him for love of whom I would have again sinned. But from the man or woman who has played false with conscience, a dreadful reckoning is ever exacted. I strangled the voice of God within me, as a woman strangles the cry in the throat of the child, whose voice, were it heard, would make known her shame. And now, though I would believe again, I cannot, for the heart of me is dead, and I have sent for thee, — thou who art so wise, — to ask thee what thou hast to give me, — a dying woman, — in place of the faith I have lost."

But the Wise Man was silent, and when next I looked he was gone, and the woman lay dead.

. . . . . .

Once more, in my dream, I beheld, as in a glass, a picture of the Christless world.

A strong man, the working of whose face was terrible to behold, stood, in impotent anguish, looking down upon the death-throes of his only child.

The little figure which had been wont to leap with joy at sight of him; that he had many times caught up (oh! so tenderly!) to toss at arm's length aloft, or to carry bundle-wise in his arms, that

he and she might be the first to welcome the new rose, just opened in the garden, lay with her limbs drawn up — like the claws of a dead bird — to her body.

The shining curls, yellow as fine spun flax, soft as thistle-down, were damp and dull with the dews of death. And oh! the poor, pinched, suffering little face that had so often lain against his! Oh! the grey shadows around the eyes which had looked sometimes into his eyes, as if they saw down into his soul, as over the brink of a well, — as if that little child had been God's Sentry, set to guard the gates of the Kingdom of the Pure. How often before

the challenging, "Stand and make answer!" of those eyes, — the questioning, "Thus am I. Say, now, what art thou?" had his own eyes fallen?

And now he must stand by with idle, helpless hands, while the fingers of an invisible enemy are, minute by minute, strangling the life-breath in that little throat.

She is gone. He is childless. The baby life, to have saved which he would have laid down his own life gladly, is at end. The little soul, which was dearer to him than his own soul's hope of immortality, is fled. And as the terrible realisation of his loss comes over him,

the old faith of his childhood reasserts itself for one moment, and, falling upon his knees, the stricken father-heart cries out in his anguish, —

"Lord Jesus, lover of little children, take Thou my little maid. If she is with Thee, all is well. Guard her, dear Lord, till I come to Thee for her."

And then he remembers that there is no Jesus, — it may be even that there is no God, and that he knows no more of what has become of that little life, which owed its being to his life, than he knows of the bubble that bursts with the breaking wave. And despair takes him.

But in Heaven I saw the Divine Figure of the Man of Sorrows; and lo! on His bosom lay the little child. And, looking down with streaming eyes upon the childless father, the Christ spake as He spoke in the days when He walked the fields of Palestine, saying: "Oh! my people! my people that I have carried in my heart as a mother carries her unborn babe beneath her bosom. O brother! O sister! at sight of whose sorrow this soul of mine has cried out with a more terrible cry than ever thou hast uttered for a sight of the loved faces thou hast lost! How often would I have comforted thee! How often would

I have gathered thee to my breast, as now I gather this little one,—and thou wouldst not! Yet, though thou wilt not bear *my* Cross, I may and will forever bear *thine*, even as I bear away from thee the burden of all thy sins. And though thou hast forsaken and denied me utterly, yet will I never forsake thee to all Eternity!"

. . . . . .

And on earth the Wise Men sat and smiled to think how wise they were, and that, by their wisdom, they had for ever destroyed the Religion of Sorrow.

. . . . . .

And in the Kingdom of darkness Satan sat smiling to himself and at them; for though he knew that he was very wise, he knew that many a little child was wiser than himself or than they.

THE END.

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